

Astral Dreams in Judaism

Twelfth to Fourteenth Centuries

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Introduction

We live multidimensional lives. Among other things, we inhabit simultaneously a variety of times: a private one, consisting of birth, youth, maturity, and death; microchronic time, used below to refer to the rhythms of daily and yearly rituals; historical time, dealing with the events of groups and nations, described here as the mesochronos; and cosmic time, dealing with processes in nature and universe, which we call macrochronos.¹ Some mystics attempted to escape time altogether by reaching an ecstatic, atemporal experience. Everyone also experiences “oneiric time,” which is a special form of private, conscious time. A person may inhabit some of these times at the same time; it is always interesting to explore the shifting balances between such times, balances that characterize different personalities or various cultures. Rather than attempting to distinguish between these religious cultures on the basis of their alleged definitive discrimination between times, and then describing a certain religion against the background of this choice, I suggest we examine ways different religions integrate various forms of time differently.

The concomitance of these times facilitates distinct interactions. The ritual microchronos may be related to a much larger natural or macrochronic rhythm. At the same time the microchronos may be related to historical time, the celebration of important past events or anticipation of future events. The existence of natural rhythms invites a relationship between private time, which may be regarded as random, and more comprehensive forms of order that encompass it. The attempt to correlate the two rhythms to exploit the potential of the former for the benefit of the latter is one of the main purposes of astrology and of some forms of magic.²

For a medieval Jew expected to perform the daily Jewish ritual, for example, multiple times included a *historia sacra* and also the impact of the astral order on private and public events, if he believed in astrology—as many Jews did in the Middle Ages. This average Jew would also expect the advent of the Messiah in historical, or what I propose to designate as mesochronic, time. The coexistence of these different forms was not simple, and dormant conflicts may be sensed. Thus, for example, it is not always easy to believe in the direct intervention of God in history while presupposing the efficiency of the astral order; or to believe in the efficacy of ritual while allowing astrology an important role. But, complex as these webs were, inner conflicts did not prevent an often fruitful coexistence. Answering different human needs, these forms of time were effective in different moments. Ordinary human behavior has much to do with the possibility of establishing a balance between them, so that the rhythm of life is not disturbed by an uncontrolled mixing. It is helpful to discriminate and to experience the plenitude of these forms of time in order to regulate what is commonly called the normal course of life.

I would like to address the relation between private time and the macrochronos, understood in this context as astral order. Astral order was considered active not only in external daytime reality but also at night, in sleep, in nocturnal time. Unlike many other kinds of time in Judaism, especially the *micro-* and *mesochronoi*, the period of sleep was not shaped by legal regulations; prayers were offered immediately prior to and after waking from sleep, but the realm of sleep was free from formal requirements. I shall present the astral dream as the intersection between the astral order and private life, a moment of insight, either a gift from above or a result of human initiative, enabling a person to peer into the future by means of a mantic relationship to the celestial forces that shape that future.

In many of the dimensions previously mentioned, time is not merely a succession of meaningless moments but rather instances following each other in accordance with a certain structure or order that provides the sequence with specific types of meaning. Structure is linked to meaning, and moments in time are charged with a specific import. One of the most influential ways of structuring the universe, shaping concepts of private and historical time, was (and is) the astrological order. Stars, spheres, and planets were conceived not only as celestial entities roaming in chaotic space, but also as powers ruling the lower world. While many Greek, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian philosophers and astrologers assumed a certain influence of the movements of the celestial bodies on the generation and decay of lower substances, in some circles the celestial bodies were thought to have an impact on lower processes by virtue of their spiritual, rather than their material, components. The spiritual elements of these bodies—*pneumata*, *ruḥāniyāt*, or *ruḥāniyyot*—were forces both immanent in them and present in processes below, and also endowed with the potential of being drawn down by capable magicians.³ In a hierarchical vision of the world, everything higher was conceived of as naturally more powerful, governing lower events by forces emanated from above.

In medieval Aristotelian cosmogony, the motions of celestial bodies shaped all

natural processes, such as the generation and corruption of bodies, the removal of one form and the impression of another. The lower entities were regarded as hylic, potential, fluid, corruptible by definition, compared to the supernal entities, which were more formative, active, and stable. Again, in this cosmogony, epistemology reflects the same order; human hylic intellect was seen as actualized by the separate, cosmic, or “agent”/“active” intellect. This downward emanation is one of the most comprehensive concepts of medieval thought in the West, shaped by most forms of Neoplatonism and Neoplatonism, by medieval astrology as well as by Kabbalah. Though sharing many elements, these hierarchies have, nevertheless, their own distinct structures. Neoplatonism and Neoplatonism were much more inclined toward a rigid order that presupposed a continuous stream of emanation downward, and human activity was mainly conceived, in this context, as preparation for the maximum reception of this emanation. Often this stream was a unified one, and its different effects were seen as dependent upon the recipients. In other words, differentiation is basically the effect of different receptions of one comprehensive and unified form of energy. Little, if anything, could be done to change the nature of the emanation or its strength or direction. Like broadcasting, it could have an infinite number of recipients, each according to specific capacities. Activities involved in establishing contact with the descending emanations are much more intellectual or spiritual, involving the purification of the soul or improvement of the activities of the intellect in order to better cleave to the emanations. These contacts are the culmination of moments of contemplation and, in more extreme forms, mystical experiences of union.

On the other hand, astrological and kabbalistic emanations were thought to be much more diversified. Presupposing a far more mythological supernal world, many kabbalistic theologies, and most astrological systems, play with the assumption that the different supernal powers, divine or astral, emanate different forms of effluxes, which can be captured in different ways through various rituals, objects, and moments. Moreover, according to some forms of Kabbalah, it is even possible to influence the nature of the descending effluxes by means of the commandments, performed with mystical intention, designed to control the relationship between divine powers and the forces emanated by the different constellations of divine manifestations.⁴ In other words, astrological and kabbalistic rituals were felt to be much more influential because they entailed not only specific preparations but also the selection of powers one would like to capture, encounter, or even stimulate. The latter forms of ritual are much more concrete than those of the philosophers, and are similar to, and influenced by, some forms of theurgy found in the Hermetical traditions and some forms of Neoplatonism.⁵ More than philosophical preparations, those proposed and embraced by astrologers and kabbalists can be called “techniques.”

In what follows, I explore an issue that has been ignored by modern scholarship—the astral dream, a minor issue in the general economy of kabbalistic literature dealing with dreams. This marginality may be better understood against its salient background. Dreams in general, and those induced deliberately by certain

practices, are important enough in Kabbalah; however, the main literary genre of this literature, called *she'elat ḥalom*,⁶ has little to do with astral agents and deals more with a linguistic kind of magic directed at angels, conceived of in terms of more traditional Jewish views of late antiquity. The acceptance of the genre of *she'elat ḥalom* in kabbalistic literature marginalized the other brand of oneiric technique, based as it was upon astral concepts. Nevertheless, at least one recipe for receiving a dream connected explicitly to stars is available:

She'elat Ḥalom: Fast and wash; afterward stand before the stars, where Ursa Major is,⁷ and say in front of it: In the name of Stani, I conjure you, TzShNY BYH YH YH YH B'RY that you shall send me this night two sages who will reveal to me whatever I ask and demand from them in truth . . . until he will do my will, all the quests of my heart.⁸

Unfortunately, the Bodleian manuscript is the only one I know containing this recipe, and it has some illegible words. The content of this dream question is, however, devoid of a more comprehensive explanatory system, which would explain why and how stars are the source of dreams. Such systems existed, and I would like to point out the interactions between them and the phenomenology of dream and religion.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra and the Anonymous *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*

One of the most significant contributors to astral thinking in Judaism is the twelfth-century polymath Abraham ibn Ezra. An accomplished astronomer, a famous interpreter of the Bible, a distinguished linguist, and a great poet, ibn Ezra opened a new era in Jewish thought both by contributing to the development of astronomy in Judaism and by hinting at astrological implications of biblical episodes. The range of ibn Ezra's impact in these two domains still awaits comprehensive study, but it seems to me that no other author in the Middle Ages was given so much attention, judging by the number of supercommentaries dedicated to his biblical commentaries. In short, his assumption was that a certain ritual act or a building, if undertaken within a certain stellar configuration, would succeed to the extent of the affinity between the nature of the act or building and the nature of the stellar configuration at that time.⁹ This is also the case insofar as dreams are concerned. In his commentary on Daniel 2:2–5:

The *ḥartumim* know the essence of the dreams and how the soul sees visions during the night, and they called also to the *'ashafim* who know the pulse of the arm and what the changes in the body [depend] on. And the majority of dreams depend upon bodily changes. and he also called the *mekhashshefim*, who know the propitious hours to do certain deeds, so that they might have a look in order to know [the meaning of] the dream in accordance with the configuration of the

stars in that hour.¹⁰ He also called the *kasedim*, who know the future in accordance with their lore, when they know the moment of someone's birth.

Nebuchadnezzar's attempts to decode his dreams followed various paths, according to ibn Ezra, some of them reducing the dream to physical changes, others to the impact of celestial bodies. I am interested in the last two categories of occultists: the *kasedim* presupposed a deterministic attitude to events in life, which they viewed as dependent upon the stellar configuration at birth, and thus focused solely upon data in the past; the *mekhashshefim* interpreted dreams according to the hour of the dream, hence following the concomitant stellar configuration. The latter, however, implies a much more activist approach: if one knows the nexus between constellations and their effects below, one may not only decode the nexus retroactively but also stipulate a certain type of activity in advance. Thus "certain deeds" could be calculated in advance to ensure the best results. Elsewhere, ibn Ezra mentions the dream question explicitly, but without any astral implications.¹¹

Ibn Ezra's view was adopted, anonymously, by *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, a theosophical treatise composed in the first third of the thirteenth century somewhere in Northern Europe, and attributed, according to some early evidence, to Abraham ibn Ezra.¹² There it is said that

the *mekhashshefim* too know the propitious hour to do a deed, and in accordance with that hour they are able to know the dream of man, if he sleeps, by means of the configuration of the stars at that hour.¹³

The anonymous author elaborated upon ibn Ezra's statement, as this last sentence shows. *Sefer ha-Hayyim* was copied and preserved almost exclusively by kabbalists, as inspection of its earliest manuscripts shows. It is evident that the book was known to kabbalists in Italy at the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ It seems that some syntheses between Jewish mystical concepts and Arabic magic are already evident in the Arabic writings of R. Yehudah ben Nissim ibn Malkah, who flourished in the middle of the thirteenth century, apparently in Northern Africa, long before the renewed intrusion of Arabic magic into the world of the Jewish elite of Spain.¹⁵ However, astral rituals concerning dreams appear in Jewish literature, to my best knowledge, only at the end of the thirteenth century.

"Maimonides'" Kabbalistic Epistle

One of the first and most interesting discussions of oneiric techniques intended to induce an astral dream is found in a spurious epistle attributed to Maimonides. In some manuscripts it is entitled *Megillat Setarim*. It is quite evident that the forger was a kabbalist belonging to the ecstatic Kabbalah, but the precise date and place of the composition of this epistle is far from clear.¹⁶ To Maimonides, who opposed astrology and was wary of uncontrolled activity of the imagination, was attributed

the authorship of a kabbalistic letter, which discusses, positively, linguistic magic and astral dreaming.¹⁷ This cannot be an example of ordinary pseudepigraphy, because views were attributed to Maimonides that were totally alien to his thought and even sharply criticized by him.¹⁸ Thus we may assume that this attribution is a calculated effort to link the philosopher with those trends in Jewish thought that he either opposed or were quite alien to his worldview. Let me adduce the pertinent passage in the epistle:

In the verse "And there I will meet with thee, and I will speak with thee from above the covering, from between the two *keruvim* which are upon the ark of the Testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment to the children of Israel":¹⁹ You may find in it twenty-two words, hinted at in *Sefer Yetzirah*²⁰ when it was said: "Twenty-two letters, He engraved them and He extracted them and weighed them and permuted them and combined them, and He created by them 'the soul of all the formation,' and 'the soul of all the speech, which will be formed in the future'"²¹ and these are twenty-two simple letters, and the intention was that all that was created, beginning with the spiritual forces of the angels to the human souls²² has been engraved by the twenty-two words, and man will have knowledge of the hidden²³ and will remember what he has forgotten insofar as possible things. Know that Moses our master, blessed be his memory, all his comprehensions were the announcement of the divine nomos²⁴ as arranged out of all the names of the angels, when he was meeting with them always,²⁵ this being the reason of [the description of Moses]²⁶ 'for he is the trusted one in My house.' And from this verse seven names emerge, which correspond to seven angels of the firmaments that are Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, Moon, and they correspond to seven [types of] sacrifices of oxen, and corresponding to them the holidays are arranged according to sevens, and seven units of seven are the year of the Jubilee, and out of seven years is the Shemittah, and [at the end of the seven months], the New Year, and after seven weeks the reception of the Torah, and out of the seven days Sabbath, and corresponding to them the seven altars built by Balaam.²⁷ . . . And you already know, from what you have read with me concerning the science of astronomy,²⁸ that the Moon will turn into an opposite configuration in the seventh day; this is why her emanation onto the lower world will change. All this is a hint at and an observation²⁹ as to what will be emanated here from the movers of these seven planets.³⁰ Behold, this is the order of the seven names [emerging out of] the above-mentioned verse, and the first line consists of the first letters of the words, the second from the last letters and their vocalization is that of the Bible, forward and backward. These are the names:

WLSH	W'M	HMSH	HMSH	H"	'H'	"BY
YKM	YKL	TNY	MRL	NTT	LRT	KLYL

And this is the way of [magical] use of this matter: Let him fast Wednesday, which is the day of Mercury, which is appointed for wisdom and the knowledge of the hidden things, and he should behave in an extremely pure manner and with a feeling of shame toward people. And when he goes to bed, he should wash all his flesh with water in the first hour of the night and clothe himself in a pure and clean robe and trousers, and he should sleep alone and pronounce

those verses, one time with intense concentration³¹ and a pure heart and humble spirit, and afterwards he should pronounce the above-mentioned names, and his heart is directed to heaven always. And you should do it so seven times, namely you should read the seven above-mentioned verses and the seven names of the angels,³² and he should arrange in his mouth the doubt that he has, whatever it may be, after the perfect imagination and the evacuated thought.³³ And he should sleep afterwards on the left side³⁴ and you will find, in the midst of your sleep, that the spirit of the holy God will dwell upon you and the hair of your flesh will bristle,³⁵ when the sleep of *tremendum* comes upon you, and fear to your thoughts. During the dream at night you will see the visions of a man who will awake you from your sleep and will dispute with you and will tell you the secrets of wisdom, and twice as much understanding. Then he will appear as if he has a controversy with you showing to you the place that you were in doubt. The stronger your concentration³⁶ is and your compliance with the wondrous deed [greater], the doubt that you had will be explained in a truer and more correct manner and the firmament of your intellect will be purified from all great doubts by a strong catharsis, so that no room for doubt related to your question will remain.³⁷

From many points of view, this astral vision in dream offers nothing new, insofar as astral elements are concerned. What I find more interesting and apparently characteristic of the kabbalistic version of the astral explanation, is the paramount importance of the linguistic aspect of the discussion. In magic in general, linguistic formulas recur. However, here is an explicit attempt to formulate a linguistic continuum that will enable the explanation of the efficacy of the linguistic device. Names do not only designate objects, nor do they only coexist with things, as in some natural visions of language; they are also entities permeating the spiritual realm and constituting a continuum between the angelic and the human worlds. Language, at least the special formulas mentioned above, is therefore seen as the very stuff of spiritual reality. The introduction of the quote from *Sefer Yetzirah* has precisely this role—to adduce a proof text for linguistic immanence.³⁸ The explanation of doubt, the substance of oneiric technique, is offered by Mercury, Hermes, the master of knowledge and hidden things. He appears in a dream vision and begins a dialogue with the dreamer. The way this dialogue is presented is reminiscent of talmudic discussion, when a person is taught how to understand a doubt about a text. This conversation is important from both historical and phenomenological points of view: in dreaming, as in wakefulness, revelation is more dialogical than apodictic. The dreamer is not asking for the gnosis of a hidden subject but would like to continue, on the nocturnal level, the reflection on and the elucidation of those matters that could not be elucidated upon waking. Revelation is therefore put in the service of interpretation, and Hermes–Mercury comes in order to offer in a dream the clue to what could not be found in a lucid state of mind. The oneiric technique attempts to solve a hermeneutical quandary by resorting to Hermes.

Historically speaking, there can be no doubt that the spurious epistle was

composed by a follower of ecstatic Kabbalah.³⁹ In this form of Kabbalah, revelation in a state of wakefulness is attained by means of divine names, and angels are thought to converse with mystics. What we see in this text is a nocturnal dream serving as the scene for the revelation that is usually said, in ecstatic Kabbalah, to take place in a state of lucidity. The main clue to the adjuration is the names that emerge from a verse dealing with divine revelation in the temple: God promised to speak from between the two *keruvim*. In the version of the medieval kabbalists, these two *keruvim* have been translated into the human inner faculties: imagination on one hand and intellect or thought on the other. These two capacities were described by Maimonides as necessary for prophetic experience, and I assume that the kabbalist must prepare them before going to sleep in order to have the divine message delivered from somewhere between them. This metaphorical reading of the *keruvim* is found elsewhere in the pseudo-Maimonidean literature, apparently in the same sense.⁴⁰ To a certain extent, the purifications of the dreamer mentioned in the epistle are reminiscent of that of the high priest who entered the holy of holies to obtain a revelation there. If this view is correct, we have a move from revelations once experienced in a state of wakefulness to those attained in dream. Indeed, the accomplished kabbalist is compared in this epistle to a prophet who knows whom to ask [and how to answer] by means of ‘*Urim ve-Tummim*.’⁴¹

Let us explore further the restructuring aspects of this epistle. Language, intellect, and imagination, sleep and dream, are all described here as both the locus and the technique for ancient revelation. By restructuring the order of the letters of the verse dealing with divine revelation in the temple, a person could have a revelation in his own private temple. The new order of letters differs from the old in reflecting a more comprehensive cosmic order, which also informs the rhythm of the ritual. While in the temple the assumption was that God would reveal himself by his own initiative, in the case of the kabbalist it is the human initiative that triggers the experience. The strong God, who presided in the Israelite sanctuary and who revealed himself only in the sacrosanct locus between the *keruvim*, is now replaced by weaker entities, the angels, who can be induced to go everywhere. A more cosmic order created by the structure of sevenfold correspondences also makes it possible to plug into this order to initiate contact. It should be stressed that the temple, fixed in place, has been replaced by the extraordinary human experience during the dream. Unlike incubatory experiences well-known since ancient times (where the strength of the locus was crucial for eliciting the divinatory dream), in the kabbalistic epistle the place is basically irrelevant. This is why I prefer the term “oneiric technique” to “incubation,” a term commonly connected to a sacred shrine or a sanctuary.⁴² The hermeneutical moment should attract more of our attention; further on in the epistle, we read:

My dear son, open your eye [and see] how the mysteries and the secrets of the divine lore will be revealed to you, and all that you have been in doubt regarding the interpretations of the Torah and its commentaries will be explained to you in the manner that I have revealed to you concerning its significance⁴³ and its

grandeur and its great power by the way of the true Kabbalah, and its experiment has been tested⁴⁴ by me.⁴⁵

The strong emphasis is on the revelation of the interpretations of the Torah and of the secrets of Kabbalah (which can plausibly be viewed as secrets of the Torah). In other words, instead of relying on faithful and direct transmission of Kabbalah from master to student, the kabbalist is able to solicit kabbalistic secrets by mantic devices. The oneiric technique induces a dream, in which normal human spiritual powers are transcended by attracting supernal powers that are able to short-circuit problems left unsolved by regular consciousness. While this kabbalist would probably be reluctant to allow free creation of kabbalistic secrets by the lucid intellect, he was apparently ready to allow this for dreamed fantasies. The supremacy of the higher cosmic powers conferred special authority to the purported influx whose descent may be induced during the initiated dream. The special power of the names that emerge from anagrammatizing the biblical verse is also quite interesting: by changing the order of letters, one may obtain the power to reach the secrets of the Bible, a power that apparently does not exist in the regular sequence of letters in the canonic text. In other words, another order of letters, used to attain a special form of consciousness (the astral dream) helps one reach the inner sense of the Bible. The nexus between the names (allegedly found within the ordinary sequence of the biblical verses) and magical powers is already well-known in magical and mystical Jewish texts.⁴⁶ I am, however, not aware of a link between this nexus and dream visions prior to this kabbalist. "Maimonides" claims that he had great doubts, but Kabbalah helped him overcome them and open all the "doors of the perplexities and the clues of wisdom [which] have been delivered in my hands, and the interpretation of all that has been hidden from me."⁴⁷

Why does this anagrammatization work? According to some Midrashic views, the Torah was not revealed in its primordial form, namely according to a different and much more powerful combination of letters.⁴⁸ Such an order, if retrieved, may transform the biblical text into a powerful book of magic. In our epistle, this theory is hinted at in the view that all of Moses' comprehensions "were the announcement of the divine nomos as arranged out of all the names of the angels." In other words, Moses arranged the Torah in accordance with the regular nomian order, namely the canonic one, while under its surface, or according to some techniques of decoding it such as the anagrammatic one used in the above example, it is possible to read in it the names of angels, instrumental in inducing astral dreams.

This explanation is corroborated by a passage written by a contemporary of the anonymous forger, the famous interpreter of the Pentateuch, R. Bahia ben Asher. In his commentary on Deuteronomy 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which were revealed belong to us," he writes:

You should understand also that from this verse emerges the name appointed⁴⁹ for the *she'elat halom* by means of the combinations of letters, each and every name possessing three letters, altogether nine letters.⁵⁰

The quote from the spurious letter may well be defined as a recipe for *she'elat halom*. Thus, both in the pseudepigraphical epistle and in the tradition adduced by R. Bahya, the technique for a dream question is based upon anagrammatizing a certain verse of the Bible where revelation or secrets are discussed, so that “names” emerge that are part of a technique for eliciting a revelatory dream. However, while Bahya does not introduce the astral element that is crucial for the pseudepigraphic epistle, this element is crucial for the understanding of the “man” who appears in the dream. The nature of the “man” is significant for understanding the evolution of the oneiric practices in Kabbalah. He is definitively the imaginative representation of Mercury—but more as an embodiment of an astral power than an ancient Roman god. As such, he is an objective mentor, a celestial guide for the perplexed; the term “doubts” occurs in the epistle more than once.⁵¹ This means that while we may assume a variety of astral mentors who may eventually be invoked to reveal themselves in a dream, none of them could be imagined, in the framework of the system espoused in this epistle, as a personal genius or an individual mentor. Private as a dream may be, the entity revealing itself within the dream is nevertheless conceived of in objective rather than subjective terms. Though a momentary creature of the imagination, the oneiric mentor is still the reflection of an objective, celestial entity selected because of specific attributes, as in the case discussed above where the power of disclosing the clues of wisdom and hidden secrets is mentioned.⁵² Nothing in the above description suggests that the “man” is an alter ego, a double or a personal genius of the dreamer. This “objectivity” of angelic power is evident in the fact that a special time is mentioned as propitious for revelation in dream, namely Wednesday. The assumption, not an explicit theory, elaborated in this epistle is that every day, or night, presided over by another celestial power, is appropriate for dreams that inspire people for different purposes.

The anonymous kabbalist resorts to the phrase *ha-mal'akh ha-melitz* to designate the revealing angel⁵³ and assumes that revelations will take the form of allegory and parable,⁵⁴ allowing an enigmatic revelation in dreams that require intellectual effort to decode them.⁵⁵ But our description of the achievements of the astral dreamer would be incomplete without pointing out the importance of the nonscholastic attainments attributed to dream revelations. According to the epistle, the dreamer is able to receive not only details dealing with secrets of the Torah, but also a series of magical powers that have nothing to do with the Torah. It is this more magical aspect that seems to reflect the nature of the talismanic sources (plausibly of Arabic extraction) that influenced the epistle. The attainment of secrets seems to be an ideal grafted onto astral magic stemming from other forms of magic, like those related to the Prince of the Torah, namely the angel summoned down by the *Heikhalot* mystic in order to reveal the secrets of the Torah.⁵⁶ In other words, the anonymous kabbalist who attempted to portray Maimonides as a talismanic magician, while nevertheless resorting to Maimonidean epistemology, offered what can be described as the first synthesis between two systems that were initially quite different: the Aristotelian and the astro-magical. This synthesis has

an echo in the writings of the late fifteenth-century thinker R. Yohanan Alemanno, the companion and teacher of Pico della Mirandola.⁵⁷

Pseudo-Ibn 'Ezra's *Sefer ha-'Atzamim*

In several manuscripts, and also in print, there is a treatise titled *Sefer ha-'Atzamim*, attributed to ibn Ezra. This attribution has been duly rejected by most modern scholars, though there are still some who apparently regard it as the work of ibn Ezra.⁵⁸ An astro-magical treatise, it deals with talismanic theories in a manner much more explicit than the pseudo-Maimonides' epistle does. The approximate time of its composition is the latter thirteenth or the early fourteenth century, and I assume that the place is Spain. As Z. Edelman (the editor of the pseudo-Maimonidean epistle) has pointed out, there are important convergences between the pseudo-Ibn Ezra treatise and the pseudo-Maimonidean epistle dealt with above.⁵⁹ A perusal of this magical book shows that a Neoplatonic attitude to reality informs its structure, though magical linguistics, plausibly stemming from Jewish sources, perhaps kabbalistic ones, are also influential. The main contribution of this treatise is not so much to the Spanish Kabbalah, which only rarely resorted to the concept of drawing down spiritual powers, but to the much later figure Yohanan Alemanno, mentioned above. The anonymous author draws heavily upon the Arabic view of drawing down spiritual forces from various astral bodies; this seems to be the first detailed treatment of this issue in a Hebrew source, which apparently incorporated paragraphs translated from Arabic. I would like to adduce just one passage which is pertinent for our topic:

The spiritual force is the highest one among all the spiritual forces, and it is the agent intellect which was [also] called *Shekhinah*⁶⁰ and by [means of] him the drawer down of it⁶¹ will know the Creator, blessed be He, and it will teach him during the time of mental concentration and while he is asleep, in hints, which are like answers to his questions that he asked it. And he⁶² will interpret them and arrange them in the state of wakefulness, in an order and manner appropriate to the language of his generation, by means of parables and words and usages, in that language and custom . . . And there is a prophet upon whom emanation will descend in a state of wakefulness, without causing him to dream⁶³ or exhaust his power or cause him to fall asleep. But if he will not be an expert and know how to cause its descent and its worship and its sacrifices, it will kill him, and there was not one of them that was perfect in this matter but Moses, our master, blessed be his memory, and this is why it has been said⁶⁴ that he was prophesying by [means of] the shining mirror, whereas the other prophets did it only by means of the mirror that does not shine. And the explanation of it is that it was emanating upon him because of the scarcity of his dealing with sensible things, whereas the other [prophets] were not like him, because they were dealing with the matters of this world. This was coupled with the fact that they were not prepared and ready as he was, and this is the reason that this intellect was not descending upon them constantly, in the manner it was descending upon Moses our master, blessed be his memory, but only in a dream or terrifying visions.⁶⁵

What the anonymous thinker has done here, in a manner reminiscent of the spurious letter, is to combine Maimonides' vision of prophecy (as the efflux stemming from the agent intellect, along with his distinction between Moses' sublime prophecy and that of the other prophets⁶⁶) with the astral-magic vision of drawing down the emanation from above by ritual means. The astro-magical rituals described at length in this book are similar to those rituals described (and fiercely opposed) by Maimonides as characteristic of the Sabeans.⁶⁷ This work is also concerned with linguistic magic, attributed here explicitly to Aristotle,⁶⁸ though this issue is less central than in the epistle attributed to Maimonides. If the pseudo-Ibn Ezra treatise, or his sources, were composed before the epistle, the very attribution to Aristotle of linguistic magic dealing with divine names⁶⁹ could have inspired the attribution to Maimonides (an author deeply affected by Aristotelian thinking) of an alleged resort to linguistic magic. In one way or another, the two pseudepigraphic writings were designed to construe an interest in astro-magic either in Maimonides or in his main source, despite tension between Aristotle and Maimonides and the magical contents of astral theories.

Diurnal and Nocturnal Religious Tendencies

Remo Bodei has suggested recently that in wakefulness the personality is much more unified, while in the state of dreaming the various personalities tend to become more independent.⁷⁰ In other terms, while the normal state of consciousness is, theologically speaking, much more religiously centripetal, that of the dream (including astral dreams) is much more centrifugal. I would argue that processes that depend on macrochronicity are more prone to become centrifugal than those related to microchronicity. Centrifugal motion invites differentiation and plurality much more than centripetal motion. Or, to translate this more horizontal suggestion into vertical terms: the upward movement, namely philosophical and mystical attempts to ascend to the One, is much more centripetal, while attempts to draw down powers from above may be conceived of as much more centrifugal. Or, to attempt to offer another categorization: the upward unifying motion of the unitive mystics, striving toward one center of being, is characterized by unification and sometimes restriction of some human capacities, which also means a certain propensity to deprivation. The downward attraction of spiritualities of the planets means fulfillment, or plenitude understood as plurality; or, to use religious terminology (charged as it may be), polytheism and magic and, in one word, astro-magic. In temporal terms, astral dreams deal with plenitude as embodied by an open creation, and thus a future-oriented religious modality and the fulfillment of the personal needs of the individual.

Unitive mysticism is a much more past-oriented religiosity, attempting to regain a paradisiac state of consciousness, seen as disrupted by sin and embodied in "normal life." In terms of substance, the vertical movement of ascending is spiritualistic, attempting to simplify the complexity of the human aggregatus, elevating the

material and transforming it into a more spiritual entity. The centrifugal motion attempts to transform the spiritual into something material and, consequently, the one into the multiple. Astral dreams are therefore concerned with solving a particular concrete problem not by reducing its importance or by transcending it in favor of a more sublime form of activity, but on the contrary, by breaking the spiritual into fragments in order to complete the particular. According to some texts, God dresses himself in a garment in order to reveal himself to man, while according to other texts, the mystico-philosophical ones, man divests himself of his materiality in order to become God. Theophany is the theological mode of the downward movement, whereas apotheosis is more concerned with anthropology, dealing as it does with the ascending movement.⁷¹ However, different as those forms of religious experience may be, they not only coexist, as in the case of Alemanno's ladder of states of cognitions,⁷² but sometimes may complement each other. The complexity discussed in my opening remarks is achieved not by the renunciation of one of these two forms in favor of the other, but by conjugating the two and thus also altering each of them as they become part of a more comprehensive scheme. The plenitude of the centripetal, with its concreteness of detail, may strive for meaning in the frame of the ascending mode, which transcends the existing order and unifies it. While astral dreams are related to the more immanentist approach, which is inclined to see *deus in rebus*, the ascending approach strives to see *omnia res in deo*. For our discussion, the salient fact is that two of the most important sources for the concept of astral dreams, the spurious letter of Maimonides and the spurious treatise of Abraham ibn Ezra, are forgeries attributed to the two most influential Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages. I am inclined to assume that only by resorting to the pseudepigraphical genre could astral dream theory move from the margin toward a somewhat more influential position in Jewish thought. In other words, the anomian or sometimes even antinomian rites may be performed at night (according to some texts),⁷³ though they are forbidden in a state of wakefulness. The diurnal, conscious state of mind may be described as much more "monotheistically" inclined while the oneiric, nocturnal experiences may be described as much more "polytheistically" oriented.

Indeed, in one of the most interesting discussions of the danger of polytheism in kabbalistic literature, the early sixteenth-century R. Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, though criticizing prayers addressed to angels, nevertheless defends the technique of *she'elat halom* and *she'elah be-haqitz*, claiming that the kabbalist who resorts to this technique is explicitly mentioning the glory of God as the supreme entity.⁷⁴ This claim notwithstanding, it is striking that this kabbalist found it necessary to justify using the technique while attacking other forms of angel worship as idolatrous.

Notes

1. On the three types of time see Idel 1998c.
2. I shall be concerned here only with the astral aspects of magic and dream, as inspired

by views stemming from Greek and Arabic sources, as analyzed in the two studies of S. Pines (1980; 1988).

3. On these powers and the impact of the concept of spiritual forces, see the important studies by Pines 1980, 1988; also Idel 1995a.

4. On the relation between commandments and astral views, see Kiener 1987: 14–15, 20–22; Idel 1983b: 196, 203–208.

5. See Idel 1995a: 287–288, note 178.

6. On this literature see Lesses 1995; Werblowsky 1962: 47–48, 76, 142–144; Idel 1983a: 185–266; 1997.

7. *Ha-'agalsh sham*.

8. Ms. Oxford Bodliana 1965, fol. 183a.

9. On this theme see the important study of Langermann 1993.

10. *Ibid*.

11. Strangely enough, in his other commentaries on the biblical verses where the term *mekhashshaf* appears, ibn Ezra does not offer this astrological interpretation. See, e.g., the two versions of his commentary on Exodus 7:12.

12. On this anonymous book see Dan 1968: 143–156 and Idel 1990a: 86–91.

13. Ms. Parma, de Rossi 1390, fols. 128b–129a.

14. At least the three earliest manuscripts of this book have been copied, anonymously, in Rome in the eighties of the thirteenth century. See Idel 1998a.

15. See Idel 1990b: 4–15 and Vajda's important study (1954).

16. See my suggestion that it might have been fabricated in Catalonia in the seventies or the eighties of the thirteenth century, Idel 1998b.

17. On this spurious letter see Scholem 1935a: 91–92; 1935b: 104–105; Idel 1998b.

18. Therefore, I assume that some views that the author mistakenly attributed to the great eagle show indeed that he was aware of attributing a view that was opposed by the philosopher.

19. Exodus 25:22.

20. This book was never mentioned by Maimonides. In my opinion, this was deliberate, because he opposed linguistic magic and mysticism that play such an important role in its cosmology.

21. *Sefer Yetzirah* 2:2.

22. *Nefashot 'Enoshiyot*. In print *nefashot hitzoniyyot*, apparently, impure souls or demons.

23. *Ba-ne'elam*. So in ms. London, British Library Or. 19788, and *Liderosh 'Elohim* (Hamoï 1870). In *Hemdah Genuzah* (Edelmann 1856) the version is *Ba-'Olam*, which is a copyist's error.

24. *Ha-Nimus ha-'Elohi*.

25. *Tamid*, namely "in a constant manner."

26. Numbers 12:7.

27. Numbers 23:14.

28. *Hokhmat ha-tekhunah*. The anonymous forger is often insinuating a common study of Maimonides and his student, of Kabbalah and astronomy or astrology.

29. *He'arah*.

30. This view represents an Avicennian approach.

31. *Be-kavvanah 'atzumah*.

32. *Min ha-mal'akhim*, literally "from the angels."

33. *Mahashavah penuyah*.

34. This is a recurrent recommendation for obtaining a divinatory dream, found in many recipes, already in ancient texts.

35. Cf. Job 4:15.

36. *Hitbodedutkha*. On this meaning of the term *hitbodedut* see Idel 1989a: 103–169.
37. Ms. London, British Library Or. 19788, fols. 4b–5a; *Liderosh 'Elohim*, fols. 19b–20a; *Hemdah Genuzah*, fols. 43b–44a.
38. On this concept see Idel 1995: 215–219.
39. This point has already been made by Scholem, see note 17 above.
40. See Idel 1989b: 43.
41. Ms. London, fol. 6a.
42. Incubation is often related not only to fixed places, such as temples, but also to strong gods that preside over these shrines, while the oneiric techniques as represented by the *she'elat ḥalom* literature are mobile and, while addressing the supreme deity, they involve the reception of the answers from weaker intermediary powers, such as angels.
43. *Ta'amah*.
44. *Nitztaḏdeq*, which means, literally, justified or verified.
45. Ms. London, fol. 5b.
46. See Scholem 1969: 28–29; Idel 1981: 28–29; Wolfson 1993: 45, 47.
47. *Hemdah Genuzah*, fol. 43a.
48. See Scholem 1969: 27.
49. *Shem mumḥeh*.
50. *Commentary on the Torah*, ed. Ch. D. Chavel, vol. III [Jerusalem, 1969] p. 436. The resort to this verse as part of an oneiric technique recurred later on in kabbalistic literature; see Idel 1983a: 206–209; Cordovero 1945: 4. Interestingly enough Cordovero too claims that the combinations of three letters are names of angels.
51. See the two quotes adduced above from the epistle.
52. The nexus between Hermes and interpretation, namely hermeneutics, is well known. See Plato, *Cratylus*, 408ab.
53. *Hemdah Genuzah*, fol. 44a, *Liderosh 'Elohim*, fol. 20b.
54. *Mashal u-melitzah*, *ibid*.
55. *Liderosh 'Elohim*, fol. 20b.
56. See Lesses 1995: 274–298.
57. Alemanno's views on astral dreams will be the subject of a separate study. See below, note 71.
58. Ed. M. Grossberg, [London, 1901]; Tishby 1989: 3, 904, note 142.
59. *Hemdah Genuzah*, fol. 43a note.
60. This designation of the agent intellect is implicit in several medieval texts, where the ten *sefirot*, of whom the *Shekhinah* is the last one, are identified with the ten separate intellects, of whom the agent intellect is the last one. See, e.g., Abulafia's text pointed out by Scholem 1961: 143.
61. *Ha-morido*.
62. Or it.
63. *Mi-beli she-yaḥlimehu*.
64. *Yevamot*, fol. 49b, *Sukkah*, fol. 45b. These texts have been widely exploited by medieval authors dealing with the issue of revelation.
65. *Sefer ha-'Atzamim*, p. 13.
66. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, 2:36.
67. See *ibid.*, 3:29.
68. *Sefer ha-'Atzamim*, pp. 13–14.
69. See the passage from Picatrix to this effect; cf. Idel 1995a: 74. On Aristotle as a magician in the Middle Ages see the spurious *Secretum Secretorum*.
70. Bodei 1997.
71. On this issue see Idel 1996.

72. See for the time being the discussions found in Alemanno's passages extant in ms. Oxford 2234, fol. 106b; ms. Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale 849, fol. 28ab; *Sha'ar ha-Hesheq*, fol. 42a; ms. Oxford 1535, fol. 123a.

73. See Idel 1995b.

74. Cf. *Hora'ot be-'Inianeï Mal'akhim*, ms. New York, Columbia 6H 13, fol. 37b.

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